

Profiles in Cryptozoology: Commander Attilio Gatti

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Attilio Gatti (1896-1969) was an Italian explorer who led numerous safari expeditions in Africa. Gatti graduated from the Italian Military Academy and during WWI became a Squadron Commander in the Royal Italian Air Force. He began exploring Africa in 1920, collecting specimens for natural history museums. (Gatti later recounted (1962) that in the early years, “with scientists attached to one or another of my expeditions, I had discovered, collected and classified close to three score of new insects, reptiles and small mammals.”) He wrote at least 19 books recounting his African adventures, and his American wife, Ellen, wrote one herself. Gatti also photographed and filmed the people and animals he encountered (producing one early film, *Siliva the Zulu* (1927)). He was the first person to photograph a live okapi in its natural habitat. He is perhaps best known for, during his later Congo expeditions, using luxuriously-outfitted ‘jungle yachts’ (called ‘deluxe apartments on wheels’) produced by International Harvester. Among his zoological endeavors were attempts to transport live okapis and bongos to European zoos.

It should be no surprise that an experienced African explorer would occasionally discuss alleged undescribed or even mythical species. Gatti had a strong interest in discovering new species, but it doesn’t appear that he had any actual training in zoology, so his observations were often tinged with subjectivity. Still, his anthropological notes are fascinating and may certainly suggest future directions for cryptozoological investigations.

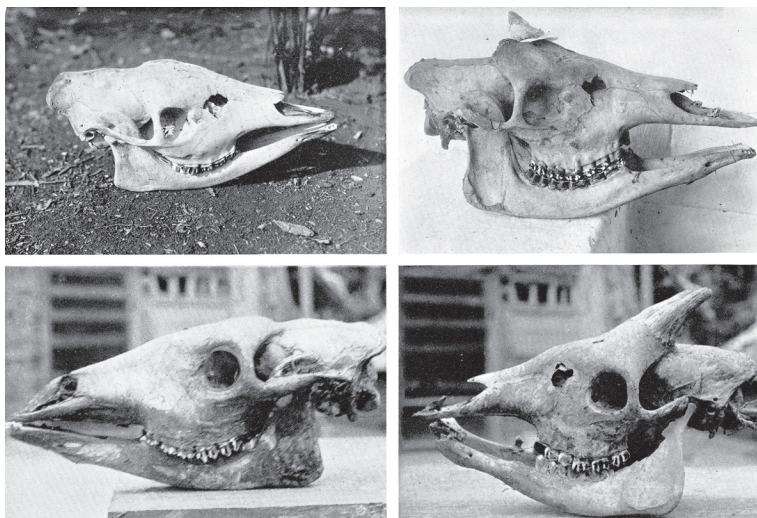
THE OKAPI

One interesting point regarding the okapi is that Gatti discovered it was a taboo animal to the Kibali-Ituri natives, and they believed it had fantastical traits (what we might refer to today as paranormal

beliefs). Within scientific publications, there is a tendency to gloss over or ignore folkloric attachments to rare or undescribed animals, but recognizing this type of folklore allows us to consider modern paranormalist claims regarding mystery animals more objectively. “For months the commander had talked okwapi [okapi] to deaf pygmies. They didn’t relish the topic. For them the okwapi is a beast almost tabu. Only the greatest chiefs and medicine men may wear its fur. It is a dangerous animal, they say, a changeling that turns into a poisonous fish when it goes down to the water. It also eats poison weeds” (Canning 1937).

Gatti believed he had discovered a new race of okapi which was separated from the known species by the Epulu River. He examined okapi skulls from both sides of the river, as well as several live specimens, and believed those of the unknown okapi were consistent with each other, yet consistently different from the known okapi. He proposed the name Kibali okapi (*Ocuapia kibalensis*) for the new race, though noted that his description was tentative and needed authoritative corroboration.

“The most striking difference between the two races is found in the head. The *ocuapia kibalensis*, thinner and lighter head than the *ocapia johnstoni*. In the former the front line descends straight from



Gatti’s (1937) okapi skull comparison. The Kibali okapi makes up the top row, the known okapi is at bottom. Females are left, males are right.

the horns to the nose; while in the latter, this line forms a well-defined convex angle at about one-third of the distance between horns and nose.

“Viewed from above, the head of the Kibali Okwapi forms a regular triangle from the temporal bones to the nose, while that of the *ocapia johnstoni* forms a massive square from the temporal bones to the beginning of a denture, narrowing sharply thereafter and continuing in a very thin strip to the nose. This is what gives to the head of the Okwapi of the first-known race that strange, uncanny appearance, further emphasized by the convexity of the lateral oral walls, so extreme in proportion to the lower jaw that often the upper teeth do not coincide with the lower, and hence the grinding surface is greatly reduced. This naturally influences mastication, and therefore digestion and general condition of the animal, which usually is less developed and almost always of poorer appearance of nourishment and coat than the *ocapia kibalensis*.

“The skull of the *ocapia johnstoni*, massive and heavy, has a comparatively smaller ocular cavity, and in the male presents a pair of horns which were astonishing for us, accustomed as we were to the Okwapi of the Kibali. The horns of the former make one body with the skull and are strong, long, pointed and inclined toward the back. Never have I happened to see a specimen, dead or alive, with broken horns. One which I examined had horns five inches long; many had horns of four inches or four and a half inches.

“The *ocapia kibalensis*, on the contrary, has very short, blunt horns never exceeding two inches in length. They are usually so worn on the inner and rear sides as to show a flat, smooth surface. And, most interesting of all, the horns are not a part of the skull, but rest on it, on a broad, irregular base, and are held only by the skin which covers them to their inclined, flat tops. Which explains how often one finds an adult male with one horn, or no horns at all, their previous place being marked by scars left on the skin, but by no sign whatever on the skull. . . .

“The *ocapia johnstoni*, smaller than his Kibali brother, less well-nourished and healthy, is certainly also less strong, pugnacious and aggressive. The two adult Okwapi I saw at the Buta Mission were enclosed in a low palisade of light bamboo that would not have lasted a second under the butts and kicks of one of the Okwapi we captured. Seeing those two quiet, subdued animals that went mournfully wherever they were pushed by the point of a long stick handled through

the wide gaps of that weak corral, my wife and I could not believe our own eyes. Especially remembering the violence, determination and strength of our first Okwapi when, a living expression of power and might in spite of the exhaustion of forty hours passed without food in the bottom of a muddy pit, he charged and easily broke that huge palisade of enormous green trunks bound solidly together.

“The impression we received at Buta found a complete confirmation in the attitude shown toward the Okwapi by pygmies and natives. While in the Aruwimi, in the Itimbiri, in the Uele, they have no fear at all of the animal, in our forest even the best hunters, both Mambuti and Bandande, consider the Okwapi to be a very dangerous animal; as they did not mind showing by skinning instantaneously up the nearest tree every time I tried to keep them in the neighbourhood of an adult male, or even more an adult female, which is usually appreciably larger and more aggressive than a male of the same age.

“This fear of the Kibali Okwapi is so ingrained in the natives [that] when Toto, our baby Okwapi, was loose in the camp only *Kapita Kaluèse*, and only when I was present, had the courage of approaching him. All the other men, even the pygmies who had helped in the capture, were not ashamed to run away at full speed the moment Toto lowered his head and galloped in their direction” (Gatti 1937).

Gatti was unable to send a live specimen back to Europe, but managed to obtain physical specimens of both male and female Kibali okapis for a museum. A few additional okapi “species” were described in the early 1900s (e.g., *Okapia liebrechtsi*, *Okapia eriksoni*), based on striping differences among other characters, but these, along with Gatti’s discovery, were quickly synonymized with the first-described *Okapia johnstoni* as simple variation among one species. Recent research suggests that okapis exhibit a remarkable amount of genetic variation (on par with that found in all giraffe subspecies combined, as well as other genetically diverse ungulates). The lack of speciation may be due to okapis finding a way to cross the Congo River in a way that other animals in the region did not (which, for example, led to the divergence between chimpanzees and bonobos) (Stanton et al 2014). But this genetic variation might certainly indicate behavioral diversity in the species, as well. The Congo forests might just hide a few particularly feisty okapis.

THE PYGMY ELEPHANT(S)

Gatti discovered that there were four different ethnozoologically distinct elephants in the Kibali-Ituri forest. (For those unfamiliar with cryptozoology, ethnozoological classification is the manner in which people define and distinguish different animals in their region. They may conceptually separate types of animals based on morphology or behavior which are scientifically considered one species. In some cases this may indicate areas where future scientific discoveries might be made, or they may simply be recognizing local variations, ontogenetic differences, etc.)

The “normal” elephant (what we know today as the forest elephant, *Loxodonta cyclotis*) was called a *Somà*. It shows some adaptations to forest life (shorter tusks, no more than 9 feet in height, excellent hearing, darker coloration) that would differentiate it from the better-known African bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana*).

A pygmy elephant was referred to as *M’zei* or *M’gei* (females were called *Malekwe*). Gatti claimed to have seen these on multiple occasions. In showing examples of tusks from both *Somà* and *M’zei*, he discovered that natives were consistently able to distinguish from which elephant form the ivory came. The pygmy elephant averaged 5 feet in height, though Gatti saw one male that appeared to be 6 feet high. The ears are proportionally larger, “almost square in form, with corners rounded.” Gatti noted, “Usually the *M’zei* are so small and their ears so big, that the latter give the impression of reaching the ground.” Their hearing was acute, and sight was poor. “In this abnormally acute sense of hearing there probably is to be found the best reason for the general disbelief in the pygmy elephant, and also the conviction of its extreme rarity entertained by the few people admitting its existence. For the *M’zei*, intercepting the slightest noise at an incredible distance, normally has plenty of time to elude the hunter’s pursuit by silently disappearing from his path, helped in this by its small bulk and great agility and surprising swiftness of movement” (Gatti 1937). The pygmy elephant has short, extremely sharp tusks, “at least a third heavier . . . than [young forest elephant] tusks of the same length.” These tusks are usually reddish; “in an old male can take the most beautiful tones, dark purple, blood-red, rich brown with golden streaks, as of precious marble, often with the points so smoothly and deeply flattened on the sides as to appear like rough scimitars” (Gatti 1937). While forest

elephant herds averaged 10-12 individuals, the pygmy elephants traveled in very large herds, often over 100 individuals. Pygmy elephants were generally believed to be more aggressive, more cunning, and more vindictive than the forest elephant.

A second form of pygmy elephant, a “pygmy among pygmies,” was one Gatti heard about, but never saw himself. They were “said to be no higher than four feet. Their colour is supposed to be decidedly whitish; their ferocity extraordinary; their habitat the ‘zone of mystery,’ . . . described to me the thousand odd square miles north of the Stanleyville-Irumu road included between the Epulu, Mava, M’bure and Akaba rivers” (Gatti 1937). A Mr. Hackars, Commissaire of the Kibali-Ituri District, was said to have entered this area, “only to find himself abandoned by his pygmies and shortly thereafter attacked by a small herd of the white dwarf elephants, which kept him in dire distress on the branches of a tree for a good many hours until a strong rescue party came to deliver him.”

Gatti noted also stories of large elephants, seen by many old hunters, described with two pairs of tusks each. One large four-tusked skull was presented to an official in Lubero, and supposedly sent on to a European museum (possibly what is now the AfricaMuseum in Belgium).



Gatti's (1937) photo of a *M'zei*

There is at least one four-tusked elephant skull in an African museum (Luptak et al 2009), so as Gatti pointed out, these stories may be based on “freak” elephants rather than a distinct race.

THE NDEGI

Bird, bat, hairy pterosaur? There aren’t enough details for classification with this mystery flyer, though the ethnozoological scheme of the pygmies apparently placed it with the birds: “. . . a bird so enormous and powerful that in one instant it can reduce to a pulp the strongest man; and it is absolutely invulnerable because of a cuirass of thick, heavy hair, covering the whole body except for the feathered wings” (Gatti 1937).

As Gatti noted: “This word [Ndegi] means simply ‘bird,’ in general. The particular name that the natives give to this bird I have not been able to learn, if there is a name, for if one calls by name this creature, ‘one calls death on himself,’ they say.

“They affirm that it is taller than a man, possessed of great strength, covered with hair instead of feathers, and has a head similar to a monkey’s. This description may sound grotesque, and perhaps it is in part.

“But—one day I heard a beating of wings so loud and so heavy that it startled me. The pygmies said in an offhand way that it was only a bird, but I noticed that each of them raised his right arm in the air and snapped his fingers, as they do to exorcise the evil spirits of the lightning in the great forest storms” (Gatti 1935).

Gatti believed he encountered the Ndegi on another occasion:

“At last, one morning as I was walking through the forest, the sounds of leaves pushed aside by some heavy body brought me to a stop, my rifle at my shoulder.

“An okwapi, or a buffalo, I thought; but I was puzzled at the conduct of the pygmies, who had all thrown themselves face downward on the ground. I had the sensation that the big body hidden from me by the foliage, for visibility in the forest does not extend beyond five or ten yards, was moving away from me and upward, and I ran forward to try to get at least a glimpse of it.

“Then I heard once more that strange sound coming from above the green dome of interlaced branches covering me; and, looking up, I saw through an interstice in the leaves something black and immense passing over me.

“Those few seconds of hesitation had lost for me a clear sight of the ndegi. For ndegi it was, although it was not until several weeks later, so great was their fear of this ill-omened bird, that the pygmies confirmed the fact to me” (Gatti 1935).

THE CONGO UNICORN

The unicorn legend cropped up in native folklore: “. . . an antelope somewhat resembling the Okapi, but having one long spiral horn in the middle of the forehead, and this animal is more ferocious than an infuriated rhino” (Gatti 1937).

A GREAT RED APE

“I believe today, even at the risk of appearing ridiculous, that there exists a great ape, larger than the gorilla, red of hair and differing from the gorilla in the fact that it walks always on its hind legs and stands erect like a man.

“A white man whom I esteem very much, assured me that about 20 years ago one of these monsters was killed by the poisonous arrows of some pygmies whom he had attacked.

“The territorial administrateur of that time himself saw it, but when he returned to the spot a few hours later to take the skin, he found that it had been burned by a missionary who feared that it might be considered a proof of the Darwin theory.” (Gatti 1935)

This may or may not be related with the following:

“... fantastic men having the coarse hair, the long arms, the super-human strength of the gorilla, who beat to death with their huge stone knives anybody daring to enter their domain.” (Gatti 1937)

Of course, these may simply have been variant tales for the Mulahu (below), but they appear to be ethnozoologically distinct. Certainly, they were published after Gatti’s primary expedition for the Mulahu in 1933, so he likely wouldn’t have indiscriminately separated accounts related to the Mulahu.

THE MULAHU

The Mulahu was of particular interest to Gatti, and was the focus of several expeditions, as he believed it could possibly be the “fifth great anthropoid ape.” Gatti kept his cards close to his chest throughout most of expedition years, and only a few details about the alleged creature and his hunt for it appeared in news articles or his books. There

are a few account details that suggest Gatti may have been confusing more than one type of mystery animal. The first accounts that appear of his interest in the Mulahu show up in 1935, but this is two years after his most intriguing expedition in search of it.

“The hours of march this creature has cost me, both before and after I became convinced of its existence, only I can know. Ten times it happened to me to be walking on the tracks of an okwapi, or in search of a bongo, or to be following a river just discovered, when suddenly without any plausible reason whatever my natives, even the best ones, refused to advance an inch further. Excuses of every kind, palpably excuses, greeted my insistence.

“It took four months before, word by word, I succeeded in dragging out of Sultani Kalume the real reasons for the deceptions. All the fault of the mulahu!

“The physical description of this animal is not particularly terrifying. He is about four feet in height at the shoulder, and seven or eight feet long from the head to the end of the tail. He is covered with long hair that falls over his face, and has a coat which is black on the top and white underneath.

“But the natives say that he lives in the hollow trunks of trees which his mere presence has been enough to kill and dry. And they swear that if a mulahu sees a human being he immediately tears out a handful of his hair and blows it in the face of the man, who dies on the spot with much suffering” (Gatti 1935).

This is the only place I’ve found where there is a suggestion that the Mulahu had a tail. I think it is possibly an editing error: that likely what was intended is that the Mulahu, when on all fours, is about four feet in height, but standing erect is seven or eight feet high.

In 1938, Gatti again was planning to search for the Mulahu. He noted that natives described it as larger than the known anthropoids, “walking erect, covered with long dark hair except for the face, which is shielded by a white mane.”

“The Italian adventurer said he was not fortunate enough to see the ‘mulahu’ during his work in the forest last year [1936], but that investigation convinced him there was a sound and fearful foundation for the tales of the pigmies. Advancing into an unexplored section of the forest, he related, his party made two significant discoveries.

“‘First, we found footprints which were not those of a gorilla,’ he said. ‘They were double the size of those of an ordinary man.

“Secondly, we found a dead mahogany tree, in which had been clawed a cavern. Five pigmies climbed into the hole and were not crowded. On the sides of the hole we found two white hairs, each 10 3-8 inches long.

“The natives immediately cried that they were from the veil of the “mulahu”” (Anon 1937b).

A 1938 report notes that Gatti had actually seen a Mulahu. “I saw one of them—a terrible looking monster bigger than the biggest giant gorilla. . . . This fellow was just unbelievable. He was about 8 feet high, and his feet, absolutely human, were two and a quarter times larger than a human foot” (Greene 1938). It turns out this refers to his 1933 expedition (more on that below).

A retrospective on the 1938 expedition noted that during a previous expedition, a Mulahu was believed to have killed seven natives (again referring to the 1933 expedition). Unfortunately, the onset of World War II ended his 1938 expedition’s attempt to track down the creature. At this point, Gatti had no further intention to explore Africa, as he had nearly died from a bout of blackwater fever (Reil 1939; Gatti 1948).

Gatti couldn’t stay away, however, announcing plans in 1947 for an expedition the following year, with intent to seek out the Mulahu. The news brief noted that “No white man . . . has ever seen it,” however, though as we’ll see, this wasn’t exactly what Gatti believed. Gatti stated, “I have seen hair, footprints and other evidence supporting the view that such a creature exists,” but doesn’t mention his own sighting (Anon 1947; Gatti 1948).

Ellen Gatti briefly mentioned the Mulahu in her 1944 book, *Exploring We Would Go*, noting that Tillo (Attilio) managed to coerce a frightened man who had just seen the creature to show him the location. (This appears to have been the 1936 expedition.) He found “enormous footprints, and several stiff black hairs in the hollow of a tree where the evidence showed the brute had been sitting. Neither hairs nor print corresponded to any other known ape.” Ivan T. Sanderson noted this discussion in *Abominable Snowmen* (1961), but he appears to have obtained a copy of a later UK edition of the book (which he misnames *Hunting We Will Go*) which has differing text from the book I’ve seen. In that, Ellen clearly differentiates between the Mulahu (“exceptionally large, walks erect habitually, and is covered with very dark,

possibly black, fur, except for the face, where the hairs are white”) and another unnamed creature, “a big animal with a coat of long hair, black on the back, white on the other parts of the body. And it is enough to be seen by this monster, for one to die in the most atrocious agony.” Are there two cryptids commingling in these reports, or are folkloric traits varied enough to create the appearance of two mystery animals?

It wasn’t until 1962, in *Sangoma*, that Gatti wrote directly about his 1933 expedition for the Mulahu. “I first became convinced that the Mulahu was not a myth, but an actually existing great ape, in 1928. . . . Livingstone and Stanley had written about this creature [*the Soko?*] as of a fantastic monster. Practically every African explorer since them had been impressed by hints and stories they had picked up here and there concerning the Mulahu, and tried to find its tracks, dreamed of becoming its discoverer. Now it was my turn. And I was determined to do something about it.”

Gatti discovered that most tribesmen (pygmies or not) were extremely reticent to talk about the Mulahu. Over the years, he gathered bits and pieces of information (essentially folklore) about the creature. He realized that not everyone spoke about it the same way: “Nor did they call it by the same word; in fact, I have collected nine different names for it. The nearer to the Ituri, I observed, the more these names sounded like Mulahu. Far away . . . the animals was described hazily, with contradictory details, and was talked about with a relative indifference. Whereas, all around the Ituri, the descriptions increased in sharpness and similarity; and a deep, superstitious fear invariably lowered the voices, widened the eyes, embarrassed the expressions of any native with whom I broached the matter.” Within the Ituri, Gatti discovered the native people wouldn’t even speak about it, pretending to have never heard the word, and immediately trying to change the subject.

The rumored appearance of the creature was something like a great ape, seven or eight feet tall, perhaps 800 pounds. The face was uncertain (some said it had the face of a cow, goat, man, or gorilla), but it had a curtain of long white hair falling over its face from the forehead. In order to properly see anything, the creature had to get down on all fours and look backwards, underneath itself. It supposedly took only a glance to kill a man, which Gatti ascribed to a superstitious mentality, where awe and shock would lead to a subconscious certainty precipitating death.

Gatti spoke with Dr. Morais, who lived in Beni (New Beni at the time), who told him about an Australian photographer and big-game hunter named Bob Kindreick who was supposedly killed by a Mulahu during Word War I. Encountering fresh tracks in the jungle led to the flight of Kindreick's Mayaka guide, but he continued forward. Kindreick was believed to have been ambushed by the creature, getting his head crushed in the process. A few coarse, long, white hairs had been found between his teeth and under his fingernails. His camera was found nearby, smashed flat, and his Mauser rifle was found broken in two. The hairs were retained by the Mayaka guide as a talisman.

This information spurred Gatti to action, but while gathering men and supplies for an expedition into the dark reaches of the forest, he collapsed from malarial fever and had to be sent back to a Cairo hospital. His recovery took over a year—then he took a quick trip to America, where he met Ellen (they decided on the same day to marry and travel back to Africa). It wasn't until 1933 that Gatti was able to return.

The original Mayaka guide who had kept the Mulahu hairs had died, but the talisman had been passed to his son, Amisi. After some persuasion, he agreed to show Gatti the hairs, which he described: "In texture they matched those of a gorilla. In colour they were similar to the white hairs of the colobus monkey. In stiffness they resembled the moustache of a leopard. But they were many times longer, larger, coarser, stronger than any of these, or of the hair of any other wild animal I had ever seen in my African life."

Amisi agreed to accompany Gatti in search of the Mulahu, but pointed out that no one else would, unless the local sorcerer could be persuaded to offer a charm to protect them in the Mulahu's territory. This was finally accomplished, through a complicated ritual.

Because there was potion enough for only fourteen people to go through the ritual, it was a smaller expedition, split into three parts and spread out, that headed into the woods. After advancing about an hour's march into the creature's territory, a storm came up on Gatti's section. It was during this that Gatti states he had an encounter with the Mulahu, as it emerged from the brush and smacked him down, hard enough that he drifted into unconsciousness. His guide had cried out, "Mulahu!" and fled when he saw it. "The gigantic brute stood there for only a brief instant, towering high over me. It growled. It went down on all fours again. Its form faded into the mist, vanished away. All this

happened quicker than I can describe it. But I can still see the red-dish-black, wavy fur of its immense uplifted arms, the colossal girth of its stomach, and above all, that disconcertingly huge head, which was made eyeless, even faceless by the long white curtain of hair falling from the protruding line of the brow.”

Awakening, and pulling himself together, he found a print of the creature, noting “a foot which was absolutely human in appearance except for its size. It had a big toe which was as divaricated as that of a pygmy, but in all, it was three or four times larger and longer than a pygmy’s foot.” Without supplies (his guide having disappeared), Gatti spent three days wandering before relocating another section of his expedition. A power struggle between the sorcerer and the headman had led to the deaths (likely through fear and shock) of seven men in the party, which the tribesmen superstitiously blamed on the Mulahu.

Dr. Bernard Heuvelmans, in *Les Bêtes Humaines d’Afrique* (1980), was not impressed with Gatti’s account from *Sangoma*, suggesting that Gatti probably exaggerated his stories and decrying his inability to provide evidence (e.g., hair samples; or even a sketch of the Mulahu’s footprint) for scientists to examine. He also noted Gatti’s eagerness to suggest new types of gorillas and okapis, which may have been more useful in raising funds for expeditions than in advancing science.

This was the end of the 1933 expedition, as recounted in *Sangoma*. It fueled Gatti’s interest in the creature for years to come. The last trip where the Mulahu was specifically mentioned was the 1948 expedition. It was sponsored by the Hallicrafters Company, an electronics firm from Chicago. The Mulahu was but one of several planned investigations during the trip, which would focus mostly on “The Mountains of the Moon” (Rwenzori Mountains). They were outfitted with mobile radio stations, underwater photographic equipment, and additional scientific equipment. They don’t appear to have had any success with the Mulahu, however, and no further mention of it appears in public media.

By the 1950s, the Gattis were living in Vermont, but Attilio still managed to participate in the occasional African expedition. On his 12th expedition, he produced a movie, *Bitter Spears*. On the 13th, he traveled from Kenya to South Africa via Tanganyika, Uganda, the Belgian Congo, French Equatorial Africa, and Rhodesia, all the while testing and publicizing products for twenty American business sponsors

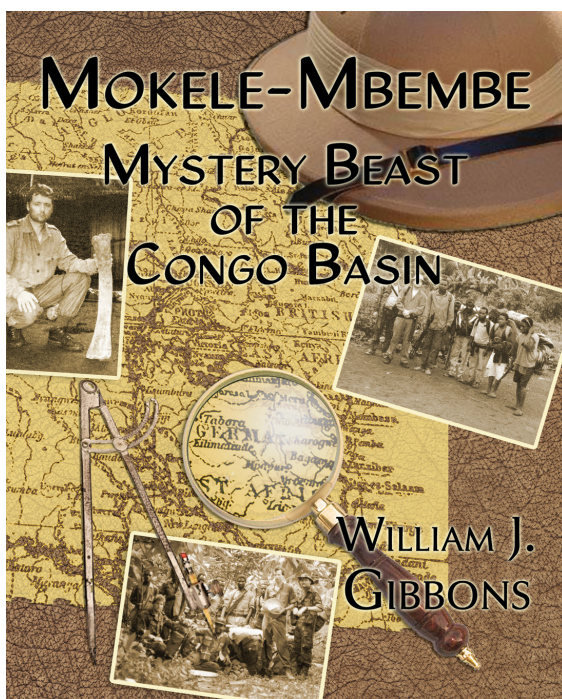
(Anon. 1956). The Gattis eventually moved to Switzerland, where Ellen died in 1962 and Attilio died in 1969.

Attilio Gatti may have been publicity-minded, and we may have to take some of his tales with a grain of salt, but he was sincere in his search for an unknown anthropoid ape, and as such earned a place among the few true explorers into cryptozoological mysteries.

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Mokele-Mbembe: Mystery Beast of the Congo Basin
William J. Gibbons

Explorer Bill Gibbons has traveled many times to the Congo Basin in search of *Mokele-mbembe*, a creature that has allegedly escaped scientific discovery. This is the story of his adventures and why he believes it is worth continuing that search.